What Activity Theory Reveals about Japanese University Student Writers' Motivation in the Search for Global Identity

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Abstract

With the increasing awareness of the importance of sociocultural considerations of students' learning environments, activity theory was utilised in a study that followed sixteen Japanese university English majors through their English composition courses. It was noted that the students' motivation in completing their tasks reflected their struggle with establishing a global identity.

Introduction

Students of English in Japan face numerous struggles in reaching their L2 goals. After decades of research announcing that such students were unable to meet goals such as native-like fluency in language production due to cultural constraints, it has been documented more recently that this is not necessarily the case (e.g., Yashima, 2002). Japanese students of English have been reported as more adaptable to reaching their L2 goals due to globalization and developments in students' global identities. My particular focus on Japanese university students was on their skills development in English academic writing. I found that the students in my study were very much concerned with the establishment of what has been termed an *ideal self* or *global identity* in relation to their L2 composition goals. This paper will first provide some background literature on the development of ideas related to these issues, followed by an analysis of interview data collected from one student in the study, in order to show that the goal of a Japanese university student in an English composition class is not necessarily focused on common goals such as grammar or fluency, but rather one of self-development.

Literature Review

Activity Theory

Research in L2 writing has benefited greatly from developments with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in the late 1970s to early 1980s. More than 40 years after his death, Vygotsky's (1978) fundamental ideas that learning can change individual identity and that individual knowledge is sociohistorically meditated were firmly re-established. As a collaborative researcher with Vygotsky, Leontiev (1981) went on to assert that a learner's sociocultural history defines the activity, thus establishing activity theory as a pragmatic and pedagogical derivation of sociocultural theory. Leontiev's scheme of activity successfully identified two distinct components—the individual and the object.

By the latter half of the 1980s, a Scandinavian derivation of activity theory was developed and explained in a paper Engeström (1987) called "Learning by expanding". Leontiev's two-component scheme was expanded into three interrelated components—the individual, the object, and the community. This interactive pyramid helps to incorporate rules and helps to further establish collective groups in the interaction. This is particularly helpful in discussing the impact a group can have on the individual.

In the 1990s the basic understanding developed through activity theory was that different outcomes should be expected from different learners (Gillette, 1994). In a step to connect motivation theory to activity theory, Lantolf (2000) went on to assert that motives define the action. This certainly supports the idea that individuals should and need to consider what works best for them in reaching their L2 goals.

For Japanese writers of English, this concept was successfully applied in Yasuda (2005). The study concluded, "it is highly advisable for teachers (of EFL writing in Japan) to assess students' performance in light of their learning histories, self-knowledge, and expectations, even at the beginning of a course in order to know why they act as they do" (Yasuda, 2005, p. 156).

Motivation

Recent motivational research affecting L2 writing explains that it was globalisation (Global English) that first changed language learners' motivations, (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). Moreover,

due to increased sociocultural diversity, now identity is causing major reconceptualization of L2 motivation (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). This is quite a development from decades prior, when integrative orientation with the target L2 culture and social identification with that culture were new concepts. The idea was established that if a language learner reflects a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture, and social identification is extended to a whole ethnolinguistic community then that can sustain long-term motivation needed to master the L2 (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

As for Japan, this concept raised particular points for Japanese language learners in relation to their readiness for social identification with the L2 culture. Kaplan (1966) explained that East Asian writing styles made it difficult for those students to make the transfer between L1 and L2. This idea remained ingrained for decades and continues today to affect teachers' and researchers' approaches and discussions on Japanese students ability to reach their L2 writing goals. However, thanks in large part to globalisation, Yashima (2002) points out that the international posture of Japanese students expands integrativeness for Japanese EFL because there is a non-ethnocentric desire for overseas interactions, thus creating a global community in the language classroom.

Global Identity

The increasing discussions of identity issues in relation to L2 writing research has led to real developments in conceptualising a clearly identifiable notion of *self* that researchers, teachers and learners can all benefit from. Of course, as Norton (2000) established, the reality is that there is no comprehensive theory of identity to integrate language learner and context and contradictory identity. However, more recent studies, such as Lamb (2004) with high school students in Indonesia, reveal that a language learner's search for the best *self* might be an "English-speaking globally-involved but nationally responsible future self" (p. 16). Dörnyei (2005) describes this as the *ideal self*, one that manages to bridge and balance multiple cultural identities.

For English language learners in Japan, it is important to make the distinction between *individuality* and *individualism*. In Japanese individuality, learners are able to contribute to the group, whereas in Western individualism, individuals are seen as competing with the group. Individual uniqueness is not the goal, but rather group harmony (Hashimoto, 2007). This consideration has opened up the possibility for Japanese learners of English to adapt their identities to the target culture more easily. Because of Japanese students' social identification with the L2 culture, Ushioda (2006) suggests that this generates a kind of *de facto* membership of the global community. It is a controversial and debatable concept, but one that ultimately leads to re-theorizing L2 motivation according to a new self and identity in Japanese EFL writing (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009).

Data analysis—Case Study: Aya

In order to explore the ideas raised in the background section of this paper, I have chosen one of sixteen cases as an example of what one student experienced throughout her English composition course. All sixteen cases were English majors either in their first or second year at university. The English composition courses on which the data was collected were compulsory and took place once a week for 90 minutes over a period of one academic year (two semesters).

The student to be discussed I have named Aya. Her background and proficiency level were fairly common among the student participants in the study. She had limited writing experience leading up to this course, and was placed in a class at the upper-intermediate level. She had lived and studied in an English-speaking country for one year. Like most of the others, Aya was generally lacking confidence, but maintained a consistent intellectual curiosity in the discussions on her writing.

Aya's teacher was a professor with 20 years teaching experience, although he had never taught English composition before (and ultimately, did not continue teaching after this course). A native Japanese, he had lived and studied in the US for a decade, and was perfectly comfortable and capable of teaching the course in English, as requested by the students. Where he was unsure was on what materials to use in an English composition course. He asked an ex-colleague who had taught English composition for many years, and decided on the textbook recommended.

The textbook was used only for the first semester, in order to establish consistent academic writing conventions, and to allow the students to understand the teacher's expectations. It seemed that the textbook, which might have worked very well with students who had less overseas experience. However, in this classroom, where students had such varied backgrounds, the textbook seemed unsuitable. Aya had this to say about it:

> Well, I think I don't know – it was too Japanese thinking textbook. Well, he's teaching us lessons in English but the textbook - the author is Japanese ... So Japanese language and English language is very different and I – Maybe the author was Japanese-thinking man.
>
> (2nd interview, May 30th, 2007)

Much of the reason why such a discussion occurred on the textbook in class was because the professor had encouraged the class to be critical. Aya's position of *criticizing* the textbook was a common one in the class. The professor was concerned and explained that (paraphrased) *maybe because of a lack of confidence, the students seem to be taking control... they are challenging the way the textbook presents information, suggesting it is insufficient or misleading.*

Aya's criticism then led to a discussion on her position in the class.

> Aya: "Our class is very difficult class because A** and S** – they were half native and some have never been abroad for long time. And Y**, me and N** has only been abroad for a year. It doesn't make us half native, does it?"
> Jim: *"So you feel more Japanese..."*
> Aya: "I feel somewhere in the middle, always."
>
> (2nd interview, May 30th, 2007)

This 'middle' position was not really where Aya wanted to be, although she seemed to take it as an unchangeable situation, and it even went as far as deciding her position on debates and discussions in class. The professor could see this developing for the students, but was unsure about the potential problem it could present. He explained (paraphrased) *I feel positive about the environment that has developed in my class, where the students feel free to use critical thinking, but I have to set boundaries.*

Towards the end of the first semester, Aya's middle position—and lack of confidence due to concerns over the ownership of ideas in her international classroom environment—was having adverse effects on her ability to complete the major assignment: an extended argumentative essay on Barbie. She commented:

> So I think, is it possible to do the essay up to his expectation? The only thing I've got is assertion in my essay – so far. I think I'm going to use that disabled Barbie as my evidence of representing the social problems. The problem is I don't know the background. I've never been to America and I don't know anyone from America
>
> (3rd interview, June 28th, 2007)

Much of the concern about the ownership of ideas was raised by extensive peer feedback, as designed by the professor. In fact, each student received peer feedback from as many as six or seven classmates before submitting a paper. Aya felt as though she could not compete with students who had lived in the US if she had to write a paper on an American topic. Ultimately, her grade for the first semester was somewhat disappointing, but what she expected—a C. She reflected:

> So, like I – I write my essay in English in Japanese style, so that's why it's not really good. And I know that, but I – still can't figure out how to get out it. And I'm kind of worried if I'm gonna do it again this semester because that's—I really don't want to do it. I really wanted more feedback from Mr ***, not from friends.
>
> (4th interview, October 9th, 2007)

It is significant at this point that Aya notes a resistance to peer feedback, as well as writing in an unfamiliar writing style. She sees her teacher as representing that perspective that she hopes to attain in her writing – one of something more global that where she is at this stage. Ultimately, she was not willing to accept anything less from her peers. In reference to the peer feedback she received on her research paper task for the second semester that she conceptualised early on, Aya commented:

> It – oh, they're kind of thinking in the way – a way Western people does. So, it kind of has gap between me and them. So this is – it doesn't really help me – like I said before, it's kind of unsolvable.
>
> (4th interview, October 9th, 2007)

This 'Western' thinking is something Aya feels does not belong to her, but it does for her peers who lived for several years in Western culture(s). Since she had trouble connecting to the American topic of Barbie in the first semester, she decided to take a non-Western perspective on a West and East conflict story—that of a Muslin high school student in England who was refused the right to wear her veil at school. Although Aya had limited knowledge of Islam, she felt she would be at an advantage coming at the topic from a non-Western perspective, in support of the Muslim high school student. Her peers, however, failed to see any advantage to this, and only suggested she take a Western perspective, since she was writing in English. Aya reflected:

> Then because I—or if I was just studying what—with Western methods. It would be really easy, and it would be really helpful. I could just criticize of her wearing a veil. And argue her right because she's in England. Why don't you adjust? You know, I did... It's really—it would be really unfair of me to write in a—way they suggest me to write.
>
> (5th interview, November 22nd, 2007)

Aya showed great concern here of the risk of being disconnected from her writing. She was floundering in her own ideas and perspectives, and attempt to assert something more personal, more familiar—how the topic relates to her, the writer, as a young Japanese woman. She began to reconceptualize her research question:

> My first—my first question was whether veiling is cultural or religion. And I—during my research, I found out it's not really important anymore. And whether it is cultural or religion, it's important to them, so... It's not really—it's not really a point to find in it. And now my question is why do they wear a veil then? Like in Japan, you've got to – what do I have to do? I'm not really doing it.
>
> (5th interview, November 22nd, 2007)

The re-positioning of her research question was extremely important. It was her attempt to meet her peers halfway and find a happy medium from which she could still function as a writer while meeting the expectations of her peers. Although her grade did not improve in the second semester, Aya explained that she felt accomplished and more confident as a writer in English. It was clear that there were several factors that affected Aya's motivation, including: ownership of ideas, meeting the expectations of her learning community, and establishing a global identity

Conclusion

Global identity as a recognisable goal in L2 writing research appears to shed some light on the issue of Japanese students' struggles. Through the framework of activity theory, I was able to focus on and identify specific issues that one student was dealing with in the completion of her writing task. This student might not have directly considered the concept of an *ideal self* in her approaches to the task, but it quickly became evident that it was that struggle that caused a number of issues. The fact that those issues were rooted in that student's identity and how that both informs and complicates her argument, reveals the need for further study in this area, particularly regarding steps such students can take to improve their writing and increase motivation. I hope studies like this will encourage educators and researchers to focus less on "traditional" writing skills issues like grammar and fluency and more on students' self-development.

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